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Alessandro Zagato, ed. *The Event of Charlie Hebdo: Imaginaries of Freedom and Control*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015. vi + 144 pp. Notes. \$12.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-78533-075-9.

Review by Kathryn Kleppinger, The George Washington University.

As the November 2015 attacks in Paris make all too clear, focused and sustained attention to current social, political, and economic forces shaping contemporary French society remains timely and tragically important. *The Event of Charlie Hebdo: Imaginaries of Freedom and Control* is one such volume seeking to understand primarily the aftermath of the attacks themselves. In particular it interrogates what we can learn from the construction of ideas of free speech immediately following the January 2015 attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters. This volume includes seven essays and—impressively—was published in 2015, less than one year after the Kouachi brothers stormed the magazine’s editorial meeting and Amedy Coulibaly took hostages in a kosher supermarket. It is therefore in a league of its own, as one of the first works—to this reviewer’s knowledge—to devote its pages specifically to *Charlie Hebdo* and French society after January 7, 2015.[1] That the volume was published quickly allowed its contributors to contribute new and inventive vocabularies for working through the many complexities of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. It also means that the articles sometimes seem rushed, with a strong reliance on theoretical material pre-dating the events covered in its pages.

The editors’ introduction establishes both what the book seeks to do, as well as what it explicitly does *not* do. Its focus is on the broader social, political, ideological, and media forces revealed by the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and how they have been discussed in the aftermath of the shootings. Those looking for an in-depth discussion of the socio-economic conditions of young men such as the Kouachi brothers are advised to go elsewhere, as are readers looking for a factual reconstruction of the week’s events. Instead, these editors consider several foundational questions, including who or what was the target of the bullets, and how did *Charlie Hebdo* come to embody ideals of free speech after the attacks? In order to answer such questions they look to the theoretical realm, seeking to understand *Charlie Hebdo*’s position in French society and how its editorial policies were instrumentalized in the aftermath of the attack. This is a highly relevant and well-justified approach that I am sure will continue to develop as more scholarly texts are published in the coming months. This volume is therefore poised to ignite and participate in a very rich—and difficult—scholarly conversation.

Few would have qualms with the book’s opening argument that “the shootings constitute an intensification of current processes” (p. 3) rather than a historical rupture arising out of thin air. The editors attribute this intensification to several factors, including the militarization of the state, as well as to free-market economic policies that have hurt the lowest rungs of French society. In support of their explanation they rely on works by several theorists, including Pozzana and Russo, Kapferer, and Hardt and Negri to situate the impact of depersonalizing forces in contemporary western society.[2] They cite the French riots of 2005 and the London uprisings in 2011 as examples of frustrated youth without organized political support. They call this situation “institutional loneliness” (p. 7), which further

marginalizes youth from political parties, as well as from economic development and thus creates the conditions that can lead to radicalization.

It is only in the second essay, by Knut Rio, that we are introduced to the term used in the book's title, *event*. Based on Marshall Sahlins, Rio argues that "a happening becomes an event only when totalized, appropriated, and domesticated in a systematic way by dominant forces. In this sense, the attack and the public response that followed it were turned into an event inside the dominant narrative of the French nation and its belief in humans liberties—an event that afterward supported the new constitution of this narrative" (p. 12).^[3] According to this theoretical foundation, the "Je suis Charlie" movement turned the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks into an "event" by promoting a narrative about freedom of speech, international terrorism, and Islamic fundamentalism. Rio continues by positing that youth of North African heritage have come to be seen by dominant French society as "barbarians" (based both on the historical meaning of the word, as outsiders, as well as on its current usage denoting wild, violent, unpredictable behavior)(p. 17). *Charlie Hebdo* defined its place in society, Rio argues, by taking on these images of barbarity (via images of Mohammed). If comedy is about distinguishing among members of society through humor (with mockery, imitation, or jokes), then separating the Muslim population (or "barbarians") creates a fundamental rupture in French society according to which the Muslim youth are seen as incompatible with so-called western values. This rupture then catalyzes the creation of an "event" in the wake of the attacks, as a long history of sensitivities come to the fore, shaping the French response to the tragedy. That this "event" is determined from the top down only reinforces the marginalization of those at the heart of the debates who do not necessarily see themselves in the dominant interpretation of the event's contours and significance.

Building on Rio's development of the *Charlie Hebdo* "event," Axel Rudi then asks why the attacks became an "event" at all. As Rudi notes, "the Charlie Hebdo killings defiled the First World privilege and Eurocentric sentiments behind the concept of freedom of speech" (p. 27). Observing the irony of having repressive world leaders participate in the unity walk and arresting French citizens who spoke out against the "Je suis Charlie" movement, Rudi argues that the event came about due to the manipulation of the concept of freedom of speech, invoked when appropriate and ignored when inconvenient. One such dissenter, an eight year-old boy named Ahmed, is the subject of the third essay in the volume, in which Maria Dyveke Stark wonders why school authorities reacted so harshly to a boy who claimed to support the terrorists, but later admitted not knowing what the word "terrorism" meant. This moment, Stark argues, activated long-held suspicions of Algerian terrorism in the colonies.

In a densely theoretical article, Alessandro Zagato uses the Foucauldian notion of *discourse* to explore what he calls "regimes of 'sayability'" regarding the attacks and *Charlie Hebdo's* place in French society (p. 43). He elaborates on the paradox identified by Axel Rudi—that only certain analyses of the attacks are considered acceptable, despite an apparent focus on freedom of speech—to observe that such a contradiction "reveals adherence to well-defined structures of power and ideology" (p. 44).^[4] He studies television reporting of the attacks in light of Alain Badiou's understanding of "authoritarian opinion...to the extent that it is socially unacceptable, almost forbidden, not to be a democrat or to express anti-democratic opinions" (p. 44))^[5] and Paul Virilio's "democracy of emotion...whereby the synchronization of emotion works as a condition of reality" (p. 45).^[6]

In a short article on the explosion of social media commentaries after the attacks, Mari Hanssen Korsbrette wonders how armchair activism widens the circle of participants, but also weakens its their force. She includes a long Facebook post by a Swedish activist who criticizes those who were not activists before the event but suddenly became active on social media afterwards. Building on the role of social media, Jacob Hjorstberg's compelling article, a highlight in the volume, considers the #JesuisCharlie hashtag and the arguments presented by both its supporters and detractors. Hjorstberg begins by asserting that the hashtag defines a certain moral community, based on support or lack thereof. But humor, he argues, should not be judged on its morality, as satire attempts to be inherently

amoral. Such a stance is paradoxical, however, since satire's main goal is to identify the gaps between "official morality and actual life" (p. 71). Hjørstberg therefore imagines a form of "pure" satire, which would "subvert morality from within, to make fun of morality without at the same time drawing up the contours of another moral universe" (p. 75). After the establishment of this theoretical foundation, Hjørstberg returns to the #JesuisCharlie hashtag to argue that the creation of the community of followers is an attempt to neutralize the amoral aspect of *Charlie Hebdo's* brand of satire. In this way, *Charlie Hebdo's* satire has come to be "about" freedom of speech and of the press, rather than the amoral images it sometimes publishes in the name of satire.

In the last essay, Theodoros Rakopoulos examines historical conceptions of blasphemy. He argues that notions of the secular are based on Christian values, which do not leave room for considering certain forms of mockery. As he points out, addressing the uncomfortable position of *Charlie Hebdo* "is not about discussing the limitations of secular critique; rather, it is more about exploring the limits to the secularism of critique" (p. 90).

Finally, in a surprising move for the afterward, Bruce Kapferer argues that the contributors to the volume have missed the importance of egalitarianism as a concept. He hopes, optimistically, that *Charlie Hebdo* became an "event" exposing "the collective urgency for egalitarianism at a time of its intense and manifold contradiction and suppression" (p. 104). This "event" becomes an impossible, paradoxical joke in this context, as egalitarianism is both promoted and acknowledged as disappearing. As Kapferer points out near the end of the essay, "the magnificence of the idea and also its impossibility are manifested in the great event of La Révolution itself" (p. 106). Kapferer uses this focus on egalitarianism to conclude on a note of hope, that French society can accept this joke of egalitarianism and use it to move forward in a more egalitarian way.

Given the speed with which the volume appeared it is understandable that the editors and contributors do not engage with other scholarship that has appeared over the past year. It seems odd, however, not to reference articles by Olivier Roy, or Didier Fassin in the weeks following the attacks (the last cited source in the volume dates from late May, well after these articles appeared), not to mention Joe Sacco's cartoon about satire and *Charlie Hebdo*.^[7] In perhaps an indication of my own bias toward close reading of concrete materials, I also found myself asking for more specific evidence for the theoretical claims proposed in the articles. It would, I believe, be easy to supplement the arguments with commentaries from Bondy Blog, for example, to give a voice to the population at the heart of the debates. ^[8] While I do not disagree with most of the arguments presented in the articles, such an approach could also resolve my other concern, that some essays felt rushed and the ideas deserved greater attention and development. Several theoretical concepts are glossed over quickly, which allows the reader to move directly to the material on *Charlie Hebdo*, but then does not always set up the analysis in clear terms.

Despite these concerns, however, *The Event of Charlie Hebdo* is both theoretically coherent and logically organized. Each essay transitions seamlessly into the next, as the focus of investigation tackles key aspects of the debates raised by the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*. The volume therefore remains compelling, particularly in its development of a critical vocabulary articulating the social and political stakes of the attacks. Understanding the post-Charlie era as an "event" (in the language of Sahlins) can indeed provide a new way of discussing the complexity of current identity debates in France, particularly in undergraduate settings where students can struggle to understand the full context and import of what has happened in France over the past year. Indeed I plan to experiment with this vocabulary in my class this semester; I am optimistic that it can help students organize their thoughts and analyses of the material. I therefore highly recommend this volume to instructors of courses that cover the attacks, as it can help organize a coherent way of thinking through the material to be taught.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Bjorn Enge Bertelsen and Alessandro Zagato, "Introduction: The Event of *Charlie Hebdo*--Imaginarities of Freedom and Control"

Knut Rio, "The Barbariat and Democratic Tolerance"

Axel Rudi, "*Charlie Hebdo*: The West and the Sacred"

Maria Dyveke Styve, "The Thoughtcrimes of an Eight-Year-Old"

Alessandro Zagato, "Imaginarities of Violence and Surrogates for Politics"

Mari Hanssen Korsbrekke, "Where Were You, Charlie? Contesting Voices of Political Activism in the Wake of a Tragedy"

Jacob Hjortsberg, "Moral, All-Too Moral: Satire, Morality, and *Charlie Hebdo*"

Theodoros Rakopoulos, "On Blasphemy: The Paradoxes of Protecting and Mocking God"

Bruce Kapferer, "Afterword: When is a Joke Not a Joke? The Paradox of Egalitarianism"

NOTES

[1] Another work is Edward Iacobucci and Stephen Toope, eds., *After the Paris Attacks: Responses in Canada, Europe, and around the Globe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

[2] See Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo, "After the Invasion of Iraq," *Positions* 13/1(2005): 205-214; Bruce Kapferer, "The Aporia of Power: Crisis and the Emergence of the Corporate State," *Social Analysis* 54/1(2010): 125-151, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap Press, 2011).

[3] Marshall Sahlins, "The Return of the Event, Again" in Aletta Biersack, ed., *Clio in Oceania: Toward a Historical Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 37-99.

[4] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in Robert J. C. Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 48-78.

[5] Alain Badiou, "Our Contemporary Impotence," trans. Olivia L. Fraser, *Radical Philosophy* 181(2013): 43-47.

[6] Paul Virilio, "Democracy of Emotion," trans. Julie Rose, *Cultural Politics* 1/3(2005): 339-352.

[7] See Olivier Roy, "La peur d'une communauté qui n'existe pas," *Le Monde*, January 9, 2015. http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/01/09/la-peur-d-une-communaute-qui-n-existe-pas_4552804_3232.html (consulted November 24, 2015); Didier Fassin, "In the name of the Republic: Untimely meditations on the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack," *Anthropology Today* 31/2(2015): 3-7; and Joe Sacco, "On Satire: A response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/jan/09/joe-sacco-on-satire-a-response-to-the-attacks> (consulted January 20, 2016).

[8] Bondy Blog, <http://bondyblog.liberation.fr/> (consulted January 20, 2016).

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